

Local Support Bricolages: Ukrainian Female Protection-Holders and their Subjective Perspectives upon Arrival in Berlin, Munich, and Kraków

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Introduction

Poland—with its 535 kilometer long, land border with Ukraine—became the initial and primary destination for many people fleeing the Russian, full-scale military aggression on Ukraine as of 24 February 2022. By April–May 2022, approximately 1.5 million protection-seekers were living in the country (Duszczuk et al. 2023). By the end of that year, the number of conflict-displaced Ukrainians in Poland stabilized around one million. According to Eurostat, Germany also saw a significant increase in the number of protection-seekers, with registered Ukrainians exceeding one million by September 2022. As of May 2025, about 1.193 million Ukrainian protection-seekers remain in Germany, representing 27.9 percent of the total number under temporary protection in the European Union (EU). In comparison, Poland is hosting approximately 990,000 Ukrainian protection-seekers, about 23.1 percent of those harbored by the EU temporary protection.⁶ Taking these statistics under consideration, this means that nearly half the European population of those requesting sanctuary from the war waged against Ukraine currently reside in these two countries—in Germany and Poland.⁷

Both Germany and Poland implemented the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) in response to the arrival of Ukrainian protection-seekers.⁸ The TPD was formally activated by the European Union’s Council Implementing Decision (EU) 2022/382 of 4 March 2022 (European Commission 2022). The initial period of protection was to last one year, extended if necessary for consecutive years, yet this EU decision triggered different national implementation regulations in member states (cf. Hernes et al. 2023).

On the one hand, the German Federal Government introduced the Ukraine Residence Transitional Regulation (*Ukraine-Aufenthalts-Übergangsverordnung*, URTR) on 7 March 2022, creating a novel protection status and granting various welfare rights to protection-holders from Ukraine.⁹ TPD protection-holders gained immediate access

⁶ Our project’s target group encompasses people who 1) entered either Poland or Germany within the first months of the full-scale military conflict, and 2) were subject to special protection regulations in the EU.

⁷ Eurostat, Temporary protection for persons fleeing Ukraine – monthly statistics https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Temporary_protection_for_persons_fleeing_Ukraine_-_monthly_statistics (accessed on 18 July 2025).

⁸ This directive’s multiple consequences for the solidarity crisis regarding EU asylum policy are discussed in, for instance, Saracino 2024.

⁹ For the purposes of this paper, a protection-seeker is an individual who has left Ukraine, but not yet attained legal standing under the EU’s TPD; a protection-holder is registered in an EU country and has gained a legal status defined by that directive. This specifically pertains to four groups: Ukrainian nationals who resided in Ukraine before 24 February 2022; stateless persons and nationals of third countries other than Ukraine who benefited from a protection status in Ukraine before 24 February 2022; family members of the first two groups of persons mentioned; persons without Ukrainian citizenship who were not temporarily resident in Ukraine before 24 February 2022 and either had an indefinite stay in Ukraine or cannot safely and permanently return to their particular country of origin (Informationsverbund Asyl und Migration 2024).

to the existing integration programs (such as language and integration courses, or labor market integration programs) and to social protection schemes unavailable to other protection-seekers upon arrival (Engler et al. forthcoming). Poland adopted a special law, the Act of 12 March 2022, to assist Ukrainian nationals affected by the armed conflict.¹⁰ This Act provides extended rights to those nationals and their family members, alongside the existing general protection framework. Individuals covered by the Act must have applied for a Polish personal identification number (known as a “PESEL UKR”) within 30 days of arrival in Poland.¹¹ Those with PESEL UKR status as of 4 March 2024, could obtain a CUKR residence card, allowing them to live and work in Poland for three years. In both Poland and Germany, long-term residential status for the period after 4 March 2027 has not yet been regulated.

Germany has a long tradition of immigration and a complex humanitarian protection system. While it is increasingly selective (Engler et al. 2023), Germany scores high in relation to labor market mobility of immigrants (MIPEX Index 81 in MIPEX 2024). The existing instruments streamline the integration process, but the complexity and obligatory nature of some measures (e.g., an active job search linked to social benefits) might, as suggested in the literature (cf. Falkenhain et al. 2024; Lazarenko 2024), constitute a particular challenge upon arrival for TPD protection-seekers, limiting their individual agency and increasing their dependency on the local authorities.

In contrast, Poland is a new country of immigration, and particularly new in receiving protection-seekers; it is only starting to develop a migration and integration policy. In Poland, the absence of comprehensive national integration policies (Poland scored only 40 out of a possible 100 points on the Migration Integration Policy Index, MIPEX 2019) has also meant that protection-holders have often relied on ad-hoc, informal support networks and personal initiatives. While this has allowed significant room for individual agency, it has also created confusion and uncertainty due to inconsistent guidance and fragmented institutional support. Notwithstanding bureaucratic differences, Ukrainian protection-holders in both countries have needed to navigate institutional settings that are largely unfamiliar to them.

In addition to the systemic difference, the major dissimilarity between Poland and Germany relates to the newly emerging (or growing in the case of organizations established earlier, particularly in Poland since 2014) Ukrainian diaspora in these nation-states. The Ukrainian population in Poland before the 2022 war was estimated at around 1.35 million. Prior to the initial Russian aggression in 2014, Ukrainians immigrated to Poland mainly to work, establish small businesses, as well as to unite with family. With time, seasonal, circular migration (for work in agriculture, construction, and services) increased (Jaroszewicz 2015). After Russia’s hostilities in the

¹⁰ <https://www.gov.pl/web/udsc-en/the-law-on-assistance-to-ukrainian-citizens-in-connection-with-the-armed-conflict-on-the-territory-of-the-country-has-entered-into-force> (accessed on 18 July 2025).

¹¹ <https://www.gov.pl/web/gov/uzyskaj-numer-pesel--usluga-dla-cudzoziemcow-en> (accessed on 18 July 2025).

Donbas region and the annexation of Crimea in 2014—both of which contributed to a deep economic recession in Ukraine—larger numbers of Ukrainian migrants started arriving in Poland. In 2018, as many as 972,000 Ukrainians (mostly men employed in construction, manufacturing, and service industries) took advantage of temporary work permits (OECD 2018). In Germany, the Ukrainian population was much smaller, with an estimated 155,310 in 2021. Still, at the start of the full-scale invasion, the Ukrainian community constituted the second largest group of a post-Soviet diaspora living in Germany (BAMF 2022), but was concentrated in large cities such as Berlin and Munich and even involved in Russian-speaking organizations (Pryhornytska 2024). Important human resources in both countries were those relatives already living in the host country—as well as friends, acquaintances, or committed helpers and volunteers who played an important role as bridge-builders for the newly arrived protection-seekers. It should be added, too, that virtual Facebook forums as well as other social media (primarily Telegram or Instagram groups) served as an important source of information for newcomers.

Taking into account the milieux which the protection-seekers have entered, our aim here is to highlight institutional framework differences between Germany and Poland. In Germany, which has long experience with immigration, an established, institutional system was already in place, only necessitating adaptation to the new group of protection-seekers and their specific needs. In Poland, however, the system was largely built ad hoc, then and there, responding quickly to a developing situation. Moreover, our analysis needed to be situated within the relative contexts of local integration politics and policies as they interact with national-level regulations. In Germany, the federal government is responsible for overall integration strategies and legislation, including welfare rights. Local authorities, however, are the ones primarily responsible for on-the-ground implementation of pertinent policies, including housing, social support, or education. Yet, city government autonomy remains limited—not only by the federal- or state-level legal frameworks themselves, but also by financial grants from the national government for integration programs.

As an instrument facilitating our analysis, we use the concept of bricolage (Phillimore et al. 2016) to explore how female Ukrainian protection-holders in the three cities recombine the resources made available to them within a specific institutional and structural setting—thus bridging gaps that emerge from insufficient service provision. Therefore, the aim of our analysis is to show the emergence of the social world in the sense of ANT protection-holders in a place of refuge.

From the subjective perspective of the Ukrainian women we interviewed, our findings in the Federal Republic of Germany do not show much variance in the experience of arrival in Berlin versus Munich. For protection-seekers affected by federal legal regulations, yet directly supported by individuals within private networks and institutions—perceptions were similar due to the relative invisibility of local, institutional actors immediately upon arrival. On the one hand, local differences in integration

measures and procedures, despite being significant (cf. Bakoben, Rumpel, Schlee 2023), are primarily the concern of city administrations and service providers, not the service users. On the other hand, possible differences in the subsequent integration pathways of protection-holders might be a consequence of personal, individual characteristics as well as the structural conditions of a particular regional labor market (cf. Brücker et al. 2022a): local specificities require further research.

In Poland, due to the fact that large-scale immigration is a very recent phenomenon, an institutional statewide web of assistance was nearly nonexistent. The above-referenced Act of 12 March 2022 did not establish new institutions, and treated Ukrainians only as individuals. That notwithstanding, city governments in some metropolises did show interest in a growing population of foreigners since 2015, organizing and funding local institutions of support for immigrants. Kraków, in fact, is a very good example of this trend. In 2016, the City Council established the Open Kraków (*Otwarty Kraków*) project and appointed its Advisory Board. In 2019, City Hall partnered with the Kraków University of Economics (*Uniwersytet Ekonomiczny w Krakowie*) to create a research center, the Multiculturalism & Migration Observatory (*Obserwatorium Wielokulturowości i Migracji, OWiM*). Last but not least, the Multicultural Centre in Kraków (*Centrum Wielokulturowe w Krakowie, CWK*) was opened in 2021—just in time for the first wave of Ukrainian protection-seekers.

The city has been the site of a number of Ukrainian organizations. Those of long standing include the Union of Ukrainians in Poland (*Związek Ukraińców w Polsce*)—an organization bringing together Polish citizens of Ukrainian descent—registered nationally in 1990, with a small branch office in Kraków. There is also a Polish Autocephalous Eastern Orthodox parish as well as a Greek Catholic (Ukrainian Byzantine) one, both serving the faithful among the Ukrainian population not only through religious services, but as community centers, too. Not to be overlooked in the local support network is also the Consulate General of Ukraine in Kraków.

The 2014–2015 Russian Federation invasion of Ukraine and its resulting early migration wave gave rise to new Ukrainian initiatives in Kraków. These have included, but are not limited to the Zustricz Foundation (*Fundacja Zustricz*), with the club it supports (*Klub Ukraiński w Krakowie*), as well as the Mass Spectacle Foundation (*Fundacja Widowisk Masowych*)—all originally established before 2014. In addition, there are the U-Work Foundation of Polish-Ukrainian Cooperation (*Fundacja Współpracy Polsko-Ukraińskiej U-Work*) founded in 2016, as well as the UAinKrakow portal created by the Poland-Ukraine Institute Foundation (*Fundacja Instytut Polska-Ukraina*) established in 2019.

Overall, we argue that large cities create diverse and dense networks of various resources that arriving individuals seeking protection can utilize. This also creates conditions for the specific role of bricoleurs, whose knowledge of existing resources and access to them becomes crucial in the individual settlement strategies of female protection-holders.

The concept of bricolage as a framework in studying forced migration

Bricolage has been implemented as a category in social sciences discourse since structural anthropology (see Levi-Strauss 1962) and has continued to be useful in postmodern philosophy, linguistics, and cultural studies (e.g., Jacques Derrida, Felix Guattari, Gilles Deleuze, and others; cf. Deleuze, Guattari 1977). It is applied as a metaphor (e.g., in the visual arts) with reference to do-it-yourself activities making use of materials and tools available in a certain place and time. Over the decades, bricolage has also functioned as an explanatory device used in research into management and entrepreneurship (Backer, Nelson 2005). Further sociological utilization of this concept has appeared in development studies in the sense of an “institutional bricolage” (Cleaver 2002) or in lifestyle studies (Duncan 2011). In such projects, in line with Anthony Giddens (1984), the term has come to describe how people actually link structure and agency through their actions. A comprehensive analysis of how the category of bricolage has been put to use has been provided by Jenny Phillimore, Rachel Humphries, Franziska Klaas, and Michi Knecht (2016). Moreover, these authors introduced into empirical and analytical discourse the concept of bricoleurs—skillful persons who recombine resources, tools, and prior knowledge to exploit opportunity and reduce uncertainty. Because they already play roles in preexisting social networks, such people (mediators, bridge-builders, etc.) are particularly important and useful in unstable environments (Phillimore et al. 2016). Herein, we define “support bricolage” as the improvised assembling of available social, institutional, and technological resources by protection-seekers to meet their immediate and ongoing welfare needs. This definition follows Phillimore et al. (2016; 2021), who applied the concept specifically to migration contexts, emphasizing the intersection between individual agency and structural conditions.

This social bricoleur concept may bear constructive potential for our analysis. Social bricoleurs perform important functions—without them, many indiscernible or unrecognizable social needs would remain unaddressed. Because of their localized connections and oftentimes tacit knowledge, social bricoleurs are uniquely positioned to unveil social needs as well as unearth social resources: they can leverage their motivation, expertise, and personal resources to create and enhance social wealth (Zahra et al. 2009, 524). This description sits well with many people actively involved in helping protection-seekers during the largest mobility wave.

A bricolage approach taken towards the cross-national study of how migrants negotiate access to various healthcare systems (Phillimore et al. 2018) proved the concept under consideration to be especially helpful indeed. In fact, that team of authors continued to apply this approach in further research and publications, leading to analyses of the superdiversity and complexity of European destinations that migrants find more attractive (Phillimore et al. 2021). The bricolage concept’s flexibility

is evidenced by the variety of its empirical applications. That was particularly attractive for our research, because it allowed us to make comparisons between different institutional and cultural structures exposed to the same problem. Of course, this was not a situation of superdiversity—although Ukrainian protection-holders are not a homogeneous group as made manifest (inter alia) by our interview languages—but the scope, speed, scale, and complexity of our subject more than met the conditions for employing a bricolage approach. However, the situation of protection-seekers differs from that of other types of migrants described in the above-referenced publications. Resources at the disposal of forced migrants may be limited; these persons are generally unprepared for migration and usually lack foreknowledge of available resources and how these can be accessed in the host country. This is why the role of bricoleurs has become so crucial.

State of the art: The Ukrainian forced migration as a scholarly research focus in Poland and Germany

Over the past three years, the situation of TPD protection-holders in Germany and Poland has been subjected to intensive research. In Poland, a number of research perspectives proved important to our project. Kamil Kopacewicz and Michał Szewczyk (2024) concentrated on how protection-holders envisioned their future, particularly considering the migrants' sense of instability alongside their weak optimism and hope. An analysis of the "landscapes of solidarity" toward Ukrainian protection-holders found in a small town has been published by Karolina Bielenin-Lenczowska (2024). The co-residence of Ukrainian displaced-guests and Polish hosts in the latter's flats and homes (cf. Łuczaj 2024) was another research direction significant for our study. On a related subject, the limits of hospitality were debated by Jowita Radzińska and Agnieszka Golińska (2024). Still closer to our topic was analysis of the anchoring of Ukrainian female protection-holders in Kraków's labor market (see Slany, Ślusarczyk, Krzaklewska, Stelmakh 2024). Other research—such as that conducted by Dominika Winogrodzka, Ivanna Kyliushyk, and Emil Chról (2025)—also concentrated tightly on female protection-holders, this time on their mobility capital formation. This offered an interesting theoretical framework—differing from our own, but sensitizing us to the economic aspects of female forced migrants. The language rights of Ukrainian minors under temporary protection in Poland was also a meaningful topic (cf. Skorupa-Wulczyńska 2025).

Most Polish publications, however, center on Polish society as the receiving country of large waves of protection-seekers (cf. Długosz, Łuczaj 2024; Szeptycki 2024; Długosz, Izdebska-Długosz 2024; Magdziarz 2024). With regards to our core focus, field research reports and working papers were much more numerous sources. For Kraków, open access analyses by OWiM at the Kraków University of Economics

provided valuable information, representative of the migrant population in the city as well as the changes ongoing in the Polish population as it faced forced immigrant waves.

In Germany, a substantive body of quantitative and qualitative research on Ukrainian protection-holder arrival experiences is accruing. This includes survey studies on the sociodemographic characteristics of those settling in Germany under the EU's TPD (cf. Brücker et al. 2022b; Kosyakova et al. 2025) as well as their potential return intentions (cf. Brücker et al. 2023; Milewski et al. 2023), illustrating respondent ambiguity and uncertainty regarding permanent stay. Similarly, Mozetič et al. (2023), based on a series of qualitative interviews with Ukrainian women in Berlin, examined often-contradictory attitudes towards settlement, exemplifying the complex web of anchoring and un-anchoring processes which can change over time. Similarly, Maxwell (2024)—via the concept of agency-in-waiting—analyzed how middle-class, protection-holder women from Ukraine envisioned their uncertain future and how that impacted their present-day decisions. Several studies also inquired into the challenges of dealing with an unfamiliar host society, on the one hand, and transnational familyhood, on the other. Both factors significantly shape settlement experiences and life trajectories (e.g., Byelikova 2024; Lazarenko 2024; Rock 2025): among other things, for Ukrainian women with children, displacement forces renegotiation of motherhood while concern for the children shapes future aspirations (Rock, Yanasmayan 2024).

In Germany, too, certain quantitative studies engaged with the issue of living arrangements provided by the host society. For instance, Herpell et al. (2024) demonstrated how the social, psychological, and navigational integration of Ukrainian protection-holders could be improved by private hosting arrangements. Similarly, Haller et al. (2022; 2025) examined the growing role and efficacy of private accommodation in response to the escalating war in Ukraine, reporting on the positive experiences of Ukrainians hosted in different German localities.

Methodology

The data we employed herein constitute part of a larger set, drawn from our field research in both Germany and Poland. In both cases, we administered a longitudinal qualitative panel study with Ukrainian protection-holders after the February 2022 full-scale war by the Russian Federation against Ukraine.¹² Here our dataset consists of individual in-depth interviews conducted during our first stage, shortly upon the arrival of our respondents in Berlin and Munich (September and October 2022), and then Krakow (December 2022–March 2023). We analyzed the types of resources that the newly-arrived protection-seekers from Ukraine were activating in the two

36 ¹² The longitudinal study entailed 6 interview stages in Berlin and Munich, and 3 in Kraków.

countries in order to sufficiently orient themselves in the new local environment into which they had arrived. The choice of Berlin and Munich was informed by early statistics indicating that, of the German metropolises, these two had taken in the majority of protection-holders from Ukraine (BMI 2022). Nevertheless, whereas Munich, as the Bavarian capital, is embedded in a multi-level decision-making system, Berlin constitutes its own regional administrative unit; this meant that the Berlin Senate had more direct influence on the capital city's response than Munich's City Hall had on its metro area.

In the German case, the sample analyzed for this paper consisted of 20 women with Ukrainian citizenship forced into migration; each of them had obtained a residency permit in Germany under Section 24 of the German Residence Act (*Aufenthaltsgesetz*). Of these women, half lived in Berlin at the time of the interview and the other half in Munich—most of them with children (see Mozetič et al. 2025 for details). Seven interviews from Berlin and eight from Munich were taken into account for the final analysis. Respondents arrived in Germany between February and May 2022 (the most in March 2022); one respondent entered the country in September 2022. Interviews took place in cafés, in interviewees' homes, or outdoors (e.g., in a park or during a stroll). Interviews with all research participants in Berlin were held in Ukrainian while those in Munich were held in Russian. The interviews in Ukrainian were conducted by a young female research assistant with a German-Ukrainian background, and the ones in Russian were done by a young immigrant from a Russian-speaking country. The average interview duration was about 60–90 minutes.

The Polish sample used in this article also constitutes but a part of the larger research dataset.¹³ Used here are first stage interviews with seven female respondents. Upon fleeing from Ukraine, the women we chose in Kraków had entered Poland between February and July 2022; the majority (four of them) had come in March. The interviews were conducted by two sociology students from Ukraine who are currently living and studying in Poland, both fluent in Ukrainian and Russian which were the languages used in the interviews. The language of each in-depth interview was chosen by the interviewees to ensure seamless and comfortable communication. The interviews took place in a café or in the interlocutor's home; here, too, the average interview duration was approximately 60–90 minutes.

The interview questionnaire used in both national studies was consulted within the FORUM Network¹⁴ regarding the scope of our questioning as well as the formu-

¹³ The first stage of Kraków interviews was financed by Faculty of Humanities of the AGH University, but the second and third was done within the NAWA research grant BPN/GIN/2023/1/00046 „Infrastructures of Fleeing and Settling: Social, Institutional, and Digital Dimensions of Ukrainian Refugees in Poland and Australia”.

¹⁴ FORUM (Forced Migrants from Ukraine in Transnational Europe) is a network of scholars across Europe—including members of the Polish team—conducting research on the experiences of people who have fled Ukraine to seek refuge in various countries. FORUM is run by the German Center for Integration and Migration Research (DeZIM), together with the Centre for East European and International Studies (ZOIS).

lation of basic research questions that would facilitate cross-country comparisons. Interview quotes in our analyses below are identified by a code indicating 1) the first letter of the name of the city, 2) the consecutive interview number in that city, and 3) the number of the stage in our longitudinal study.

Aside from the set interview script followed in both studies, projective techniques were applied in the Polish study (e.g., timelines, relational network circles, etc.). The aim of using these techniques is to elicit information concealed by respondents about their emotional attitudes toward specific phenomena, processes, or events. Projective techniques (known, too, as icebreakers, see Comi et al. 2014) also help interviewees narrate and share life events as well as their reflections on such topics. One technique we utilized was a relationship map which facilitates easy answering of queries about interviewees' social contacts—who they can count on, and who can potentially help them in various difficult situations in the new society of residence (Bagnoli 2009). We asked respondents to fill out a card with themselves at the center and three empty circles around them, each containing people or institutions with whom they interacted (Antonucci 1986). In the first stage interviews, interlocutors were initially asked to fill out the card in order to illustrate their situation back in Ukraine, before fleeing the country; later in the course of that interview they were asked to now fill out the card by way of depicting their current situation in Poland.

In Germany, the interview guide included a mood chart (which is another projective technique with the same application in research) with which we tried to facilitate the opening of each stage of our interviewing; we asked about the participant's well-being and potential changes. Additionally, each respondent drew (with some assistance from the interviewer) a sociogram encompassing four quadrants: family, friends, volunteers, and bureaucracy (cf. Mozetič et al. 2025).

Analysis limitations

Naturally, our qualitative field research has not provided us with a basis for generalizing conclusions. Yet this is not the only reason for caution in drawing conclusions. Our sample—due to a need to set conditions favorable for cross-country comparisons—was limited in two respects. The first pertains to gender: all interviews scrutinized here were conducted with women, even if both the Polish and the German samplings did include men. This does not evoke a significant bias since women did constitute approximately 70 percent of all protection-seekers escaping from the war in Ukraine.¹⁵ Furthermore, although only interviews with women were analyzed here, this was not prompted by a desire to present only a single gender perspective (as adopted, for instance, in Slany et al. 2024), but rather, with so few male interviewees in our sampling, we strove for a cleaner image emerging from our analysis. The

¹⁵ The share of women among adult TPD protection-holders in Germany decreased between 2022 and 2024 (from 72 to 65 percent) (Siegert 2025).

second limitation concerns the fact that the comparative analyses presented here in pertain only to large cities, although our project in Poland did encompass some smaller localities. Cities create dense social networks and possess many more resources from which protection-seekers can draw assistance. In fact, the majority of (but not all) protection-seekers settle in metropolitan areas precisely due to the availability of such resources. In addition to the potential biases noted above, it also turned out that most of the Polish interviewees and all of the German ones had earned tertiary education degrees. Such individuals have a much larger pool of various types of capital at hand as well as the ability to mobilize it (cf. Winogrodzka et al. 2025).

Analysis: Resources for local support bricolages

Based on our analyses of the material gathered in both Germany and Poland, we identify different types of social relationships that became significant bricolage components as protection-seekers settled down in new countries after fleeing the war.

Strong and weak ties

Our research clearly highlights the importance of both strong and weak ties (Granovetter 1973). The former encompasses, above all, relationships rooted in close, personal contacts characterized by intensity, closeness, reciprocity, and durability. These include family relations, friendships, and neighborhood relationships. People with strong social ties have access to a wide range of resources, such as emotional support, practical assistance, and information. The latter, however, includes relationships based on more formal, less personal contacts that are characterized by lower levels of commitment, without implied dependencies or obligations. Weak ties might nonetheless be more valuable for accessing new information and opportunities.

For refugee women, the sudden loss of embeddedness can lead to feelings of isolation, discomfort, and alienation (Granovetter 1985); being removed from one's social context is associated with the loss of "strong ties" or close relationships with people in one's immediate social circle. However, in our research, there was a significant group of respondents who did not completely lose their strong connections and for whom precisely these bonds proved to be very helpful.

- **B_01.1** It was all through Anna [the sister] as a mediator. [...]. You know, Anna was the first mediator [...]. And before that we needed to register at Anna's address, and, since she's German, she knows German [language]. So it wasn't really difficult to get, because I think that for the majority of Ukrainians, if you're a real refugee with no relatives in Berlin or in Germany, this paper where you live, it's the most important, because, based on that, you get all your papers being processed. In my case I had no trouble because it was my sister who just signed in everything for us. She [also] signed

in my colleague that came with me. So if you look at the list of people, who have registered at her address, it's a long list.

- **M_03.1** My sister, my sister, [...] she interpreted our documents for us and then she told us, "Now, girls, sit down by yourselves, interpret for yourselves, learn the language for yourselves." And that's how she started giving us a framework.
- **B_07.1** In general, I understand that I just have one friend here in Berlin, and without him, nothing would have happened. Because, without him, I would have no place to live. I would have been sent to Tegel [city-provided refugee accommodation] or out of Berlin somewhere.
- **K_01.1** Well, you see, in my situation, it was actually a bit easier to resolve all the issues, because I practically lived with my children all the time. Their space is small, it's not that simple. Now I'm renting a separate room, but during this whole period until November, I lived with my children.

Protection-holders who possess only limited social capital in the form of weak ties may have difficulty accessing information about the labor market, housing, services, and other resources. However, in both countries studied, we observed, as time passed, the increased activity of non-governmental organizations, help coming from strangers and ordinary citizens, as well as local government institutions supported by state policies.

In Berlin and Munich, our sociograms showed that all respondents relied on some kind of network to help gain an orientation in navigating the bureaucracy, filling in applications, finding accommodation, registering for school, etc.; nevertheless, from their narrated interviews, we know that the intensity with which these networks function does vary (cf. Falkenhain et al. 2024). Another sector of the social networks used by protection-seekers involved members of the German host society (i.e., mostly volunteers and employees of welfare organizations, such as Caritas or the Malteser, as well as the catholic churches in Munich). In addition, members of the Ukrainian (and other Eastern European) diaspora seem to constitute the dominant support structure in the first, arrival phase: the Polish Social Council (*Polska Rada Społeczna/Polnischer Sozialrat*) or the Russian-speaking Club Dialog in Berlin, as well as local support initiatives, such as Arrival Aid in Munich or initiatives such as Friedrichshain, Moabit, or Schöneberg help in different districts of Berlin. Moreover, new Ukrainian NGOs emerged, such as the Alliance of Ukrainian Organizations, Plast Scouts, or Laru helps Ukraine in Berlin. These networks were used to overcome barriers on the Berlin and Munich housing markets as well as to provide for immediate basic needs, such as food and clothing or access to health care and legal services.

Several Ukrainian social, educational, and cultural organizations (NGOs) were established in Poland or became very active between 2014 and 2022—providing support first to immigrants, and later to protection-seekers (cf. Byrska 2022). In Krakow, even before 2014, at least four institutions were active: 1) the Ukrainian Byzantine Catholic (Greek Catholic) Parish, 2) the autocephalous Polish Eastern Orthodox Parish, 3) the

very small Kraków branch of the Union of Ukrainians in Poland (i.e., Polish citizens belonging to the Ukrainian minority, defined as Ukrainians who have lived on current Polish territory for centuries), and 4) the Chair of Ukrainian Studies at the Jagiellonian University (subsequently involved in the support network itself). Between 2014 and 2022, still more organizations surfaced that became very crucial when strong influx of protection-seekers finally appeared: clubs, foundations, associations (sometimes affiliated with a diaspora church), and the businesses of the immigrants who had come between 2014 and 2015. Added to this list should also be completely new institutions organized and financed by the City of Kraków (e.g., Open Kraków and its website in Ukrainian, the Information Point for Foreigners, or the Ukrainian website administered by the city's Education Department). Therefore, an institutional and technological infrastructure was, to some extent, ready for incomers. One should add, too, the dominant social mood, which was sympathetic to Ukraine in both countries (for Germany, see Dollmann et al. 2022).

The interviewees in all three cities told us they received support—during the first months of the war, as winter was ending and spring beginning in 2022—precisely from diasporic organizations. Such NGOs especially offer support in everyday issues. In Kraków, Ukrainians also mentioned an advertisement campaign by the city council, which had become very active (with financial assistance from the state administration):

- **B_06.1** Thanks to my colleague I got acquainted with the diaspora here in Berlin. And they helped with clothes [...]. And I also volunteered there with them. [...]. Well, I say that it is the diaspora, our diaspora. I think the main representation in Berlin is the Ukrainian diaspora. It is them. I went to them; they helped me with clothes.
- **B_02.1** Yes, there is a group, Ukrainians in Berlin, and they write about everything there. But also, while you're standing in line at the Sozialamt [German social services]—or somewhere else, where there are only Ukrainians—they tell you everything. Where should you go afterwards, and so on. I would say that I learned everything from other Ukrainians.
- **K_05.1** "Ukrainians in Poland," and let me check. I just don't remember the name of this group. [Looking it up on her phone]. There are many groups that really help to get some information. "Krakow announcements," for example, helps me. This program helped when my sister was looking for accommodation – "Gdzie mieszkać w Krakowie" ["Where to live in Krakow"].

Communication through virtual and in-person mediators

Our interviewees did not speak the language of the host countries. Upon arrival in Germany, 91.8 percent of surveyed Ukrainians did not speak German at all (Gambaro et al. 2025). Sometimes they did not speak any language other than Ukrainian or Russian. This contributes to a sense of disorientation in crisis situations—such as not knowing whom to ask for help at the train station when one has just arrived in an unfamiliar place. In other situations, such as communicating highly emotion-

all things related to war experiences, the meaning is lost in translation. Nonetheless, problems in accessing services and maneuvering through bureaucratic processes in a foreign language were overcome with the help of individuals—usually third-party mediators (cf. Ratzmann, Heindlmaier 2022) who were mostly volunteers—but also by activating digital tools (smartphones, tablets) as resources (primarily in translating forms; see Ratzmann [forthcoming] for the German case). Some services provided by the public sector began to be available in the Ukrainian language. In Krakow, even before 2022, Ukrainian was available as a language option in public transportation and many public cultural institutions. In Germany, Ukrainian and Russian translations of the main websites of ministries (e.g., labor and social affairs) began to be launched soon after the full-scale invasion, providing information to protection-seekers; dedicated information sites were created as well (cf. <https://www.germany4ukraine.de/>). Moreover, many municipalities (Munich among them) used the Integreat web-app for smartphones and computers, providing essential, local information in Ukrainian and Russian. Nevertheless, in Germany, Ukrainians tended to use social media and messenger services to obtain information (especially Telegram and YouTube; see Forsa 2023).

Our interviewees also pointed to new communication technologies (such as messenger services and social media accessible via smartphones) as being particularly helpful in overcoming a multitude of communication barriers. However, we noted differences in the use of these technologies in the two countries studied. In these two culturally (including linguistically) diverse environments, the internet—in the form of portals of great practical value for protection-seekers—serves as a platform for communication among themselves as well as between them and institutions in the host country. New communication technologies are becoming an important channel for establishing at least weak ties in a novel environment.

- **B_07.1** Maybe. Or... Still, there was a good thing, it was on the website, there was something called "First Aid for Ukrainians" or something—it said that you should go to the Sozialamt. [...]. Through websites, through LinkedIn mostly. Some other things. You know, I was also very pleased that a lot of non-governmental organizations, non-profit organizations—they were not very helpful, but the fact that they existed, that I could contact them, they were ready. I could come for a consultation either offline or online, and they gave some advice, some very good advice.
- **M_10.1** Well, I have one group through Instagram. I found... there was a blogger, a blogger, she [...] created a group there, connected Ukrainians, and they write different questions there. [...]. How about social benefits, how is the situation there? Well, all questions in general—for example, to leave, if you need to go to Ukraine. [...]. I think, contacts, for example, a girl lawyer who lives in Germany, and she works as a lawyer here, and she helps with all these issues, exactly legal issues like there, what's there.
- **K_04.1** We have the ZUS [social welfare] application, which provides information about payments and various assistance programs for us. It tells us when to expect

payments, and it has all the information related to assistance. Apart from that, we haven't really used anything else. There are some Telegram channels with groups like "Poland-Ukraine" where there's a lot of information, even about new fines related to snow or other things. Then there's Facebook, I guess. There's also information there. Certain groups that provide valuable help. There was a lot of information about travel to and from Ukraine that we listened to and took into account.

Bricoleurs

We hypothesized that institutional structures would play a significant role in the creation of local bricolages, and, from the perspective of structural differences, this is certainly the case. While our analysis of institutional structures (Poland's informal vs. Germany's formalized systems) suggests clear differences in available resources, our data show that Ukrainian protection-holders themselves often perceived these institutional environments in like manner—as unfamiliar, somewhat nontransparent, yet broadly supportive. This subjective perspective underscores the fact that, despite structural differences, protection-holders' immediate experiences were shaped primarily by personal interactions and available informal networks. Furthermore, institutional offices also served as places to meet, establish contacts, and obtain information from various social networks.

In the three cities, our interviewees—having then been in a crisis situation—were unable to identify the specific actors encountered during the process of admission and settlement. They frequently used the pronoun "they" in their narratives. The "they" included volunteers, NGO staff, aid organization workers, government officials and administrators, as well as people offering spontaneous support. This included ad hoc institutions established at the end of February into the early spring of 2022 to help protection-seeking Ukrainians formalize their stay. All these different kinds of "they" served as bricoleurs.

- **B_05.1** The volunteers at the [train] station, they were great. I just encountered—Oh, do you know where? I forgot. At the beginning, I came here with a backpack, a laptop, tights, a set of underwear, a small towel, a toothbrush, cream, that's all. A winter jacket and winter boots. It's much warmer here. And I found the Larry Center: [...] they help fill in documents, go through all stages of socialization, arrange psychological therapy. At the beginning, when they started, they gave away food for free. At that time, no one got any money at all. And clothing. And sometimes there I got absolutely new clothes, and I got dressed there.
- **B_08.1:** Because German explanations are complicated. You don't understand what to do there. So you ask people and say, please explain to me the sequence of actions, what I have to do. And the group explains it to you in detail: you go to the Sozialamt, they give you a form, you fill it in, wait, you get a number, and you understand—okay, I know what to do. This information is a little bit hard to find because there are a lot of chat groups [on Telegram], but you can find it and understand what to do.

- **K_07.1:** In addition, I noticed that they provided all the services absolutely free of charge, which was very nice. Because even in such a panic with so many people who came, they were absolutely oriented: they knew exactly what to do, how and whom to support, what to say, what documents, who needed what. Because people didn't know what was going to happen, because it was just the beginning of the war. In general, there was a lot of chaos everywhere, but there it was so calm and it made it very easy for me to understand that I needed some documents in another country. And they helped me a lot with that.
- **K_03.1:** Everything was simple and easy, no one helped me—I just went on my own, the volunteers explained everything.... I went right away, and right away on the same day I arrived. And somewhere, probably three or four days later, I went to the Tauron Arena [temporary registration site for documentation of Ukrainians], they were still there, and I immediately applied for a PESEL, so there were no problems, no questions. And then I opened a bank card there, and waited a month for the three hundred zlotys they were giving out to everyone. So there were no problems with that. They accepted it, they did it.

Agency

There is no doubt that fleeing a country to escape war is an emergency and a crisis. Psychologists have devoted extensive research to how individuals and larger communities cope with such a catastrophe (cf. Pearson, Clair 1998; Schwarzer 2024). The sense of threat and loss is immense, but making the decision to flee and reaching safety is an attempt to regain control over one's life. The very attempt to organize life for oneself and one's dependents anew and in a new place is also a manifestation of agency. Some women we interviewed focused on regaining at least some inner peace, either by sharing their experiences with others or by exploring their new surroundings. However, quite a large group of respondents, mobilized by the activism of the host community, became active in working on behalf of their migrant community. This activity sometimes includes those left behind in a country ravaged by war.

- **B_06.1** And then in these queues at the Sozialamt, I got acquainted with Ukrainians, and then we organized ourselves into communities, shared our experience. I am in Facebook groups, "Ukrainians in Berlin." There is also a lot of information there. Now, just a month ago, a Telegram chat was created, and there is already information there.
- **K_07.1** It was actually difficult for the first two weeks to adapt because it was quite a stressful situation for me. And it was very stressful at the beginning. It all combined to affect my mental state, and coming here made it even harder, because I was leaving my family at home and coming to another country where I didn't know anyone and there were a lot of new people, a new city. It was hard to leave everything behind and move here, but once I moved, I started to get to know the place I was moving to and it became a little easier.

- **K_01.1** We were just meeting people at train stations, resettling them, calling the Red Cross, calling Caritas, looking for acquaintances. Then we started getting to know Belarusians who were also actively helping. It was like an anthill where no one asked your name or nationality. If you needed help and could help, you knew one thing: Ukrainians needed assistance. I haven't been to other cities, but I got the impression that the whole of Poland was like that, based on Krakow's example. I think so because later we communicated with each other, logistics chains started, and major projects for delivering humanitarian aid to Ukraine began. We started working with volunteers from other countries. Probably tens of thousands, tens of thousands of people got involved in this.

Discussion

In discussing our research results, and the theoretical categories we proposed for their analysis, we would like to highlight several aspects of the framework and findings. These relate to the usefulness of the proposed categories, the objectivity or subjectivity of our perspectives on the problem under investigation, and, finally, the limitations of our conclusions due to the scope of our research.

Different perspectives of researchers and protection-seekers

In our comparative research, various national and local systems of institutional support for protection-seekers in Poland (Kraków) and Germany (Berlin and Munich) played a significant role. In sociological considerations, the interplay between structure and agency is an important aspect of our analyses. As we pointed out in our introduction, different institutional structures made a less visible impact on Ukrainian settlement practices than could have been assumed. It turned out, however, that the institutional order was as new to the newcomers as the language, physical space, ways of host society communication, etc.—the whole thing constituted a new, unknown world. The “objective” perspective could be seen as opposed to the “subjective,” internal perspective of practitioners in these cultural processes (see the opposition between the etic and emic approaches¹⁶ in Pike 1967).

Through our research project, we intended to capture the subjective feelings of our interviewees, hence their viewpoint became the basis for identifying and defining components of the local bricolage. Those components lie mainly in social relations personified in the form of dealings with individuals with whom the protection-seekers had personal contact. These mostly include family members and friends already residing in the place of new settlement, representatives of the Ukrainian diaspora, and

¹⁶ In this, we follow, in a sense, the emic approach or tradition of Florian Znaniecki and Bronisław Malinowski, rather than the objectifying tradition of Claude Lévi-Strauss, whose bricolage concept is very important to us.

many other aid organizations with whom contact was not a one-time occurrence. In addition, there is a multitude of people—representatives of the local authorities, welfare systems, NGOs, and concerned citizens—whom the protection-seekers encountered on their way to resettlement in a new country. Here, the category of bricoleurs proved useful.

Meaning of strong and weak ties in this social context

Our research has demonstrated the importance of personal, social relationships for protection-seekers. However, our research complements this picture with the diversity of types of social relations and the diversity of contexts in which they occur. Considering these relationships in the context of a network society, we incorporated Mark Granovetter's (1973) categories of weak and strong ties. The most frequently cited conclusion from his research is that, on the one hand, weak ties are still very effective in achieving goals. Strong ties, on the other hand, foster social closure, but also a sense of control and stability. In our research related to situations of deep crisis, we observed the effectiveness of problem-solving based on both strong and weak ties. We intended to contextualize our narrative of these ties in light of the research findings, taking into account their refinement in subsequent studies and publications (after Granovetter's first text) on weak and strong ties.

Granovetter returned to this concept in his article, "The Strength of Weak Ties: A Network Theory Revisited" (1983), pointing out that not all weak ties serve functions described as part of the "strong–weak ties" idea, but only those acting as bridges between network segments. For us, this means that, on the one hand, the effectiveness of weak ties can be attributed to contacts between bricoleurs, who become the link between various institutions and potentially helpful resources for protection-seekers. Protection-holders, on the other hand, appreciate the effectiveness of strong bonds, which proved to be a key resource, especially during arrival and settlement. Critics of the strong bond idea, however, point to instability in the level intensity and dependence upon the level of commitment (Horst 2014). We have also observed this in our research, in which, after an initial period of living with family members who settled earlier in Germany or Poland, Ukrainian refugee women find a place of their own.

Bricolage as an adequate framework to analyze a migration crisis–Flight from war

The concept of bricolage, in the sense proposed by Jenny Phillimore and her various research and publication teams (cf. Phillimore et al. 2016; 2018; 2021), provides a framework for examining various entities—such as welfare regimes, migration histories, and everyday actions and resources within neighborhoods. The Phillimore team

research has highlighted the growing process of social, cultural, economic, and religious diversification across European countries, driven by increased mobility within the EU in addition to other migration processes outside. This superdiversity, as they call it, disrupts the traditional social policy systems of individual countries. It also leads to a variety of practices on how people and local health and welfare service providers seek to address their everyday concerns. Bricolage gives researchers an opportunity to analyze the role of structure and agency; it moves beyond conventional approaches focusing on specific groups or sectors to investigate health and welfare by looking at whole populations and entire welfare ecosystems (Phillimore et al. 2021).

Our comparison focuses on various institutional support systems for people displaced by conflict. Here, the differences between the Polish and German systems are less evident. Some aspects of the civil society activity we analysed, such as the involvement of NGOs, was similar in both countries. However, while the involvement of the Ukrainian diaspora was high in Krakow, diasporic involvement needed first to develop in Berlin and Munich. In both countries we witnessed a great degree of involvement by citizens who provided immediate information, material help, and accommodation (for Germany, see Haller et al. 2025), thus complementing the gradually adapting, governmental (national and local) structures. We also observed informal and, over time, more formalized activity of the protection-holders themselves (e.g., establishing their own associations, foundations, businesses, etc.). The bricolage framework provided us with an opportunity to capture these differences and distinctions in local, social practices of coping with the challenges of migrant or refugee arrival. This approach gave us the opportunity to connect subjective experiences with institutional contextual conditions, showing how agency is created in the absence of stabilized institutional and social practices.

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